

# 'Do not steal.'

Ephesians 4:28

Jun 16, 2024

by Senior Pastor Hong Poonghwa

## Ephesians 4:28 (PowerPoint)

### Preface.

Over the past few weeks we have been looking at the content and practice of what it means to be a new person who is clothed with the spiritual renewal in Jesus Christ.

This morning, we want to consider what we have just read in Ephesians 4:28: 'Do not steal'.

We have been learning about 'forsaking falsehood', 'speaking the truth to your neighbour', 'do not remain indignant', etc., and the next verse, verse 29, 'Do not let an evil word come out of your mouth', which is a possible 'well, I guess so', but 'he who is stealing, do not steal', well, my God, is that our moral standard so low that we have to be told that? Is that a state of affairs?" This may seem strange.

In fact, some members of the Ephesian church are thought to have earned their living by stealing.

It is not clear whether there were a number of people who had originally made a living by stealing who became Christians but were unable to quit the habit and continued to do so, or whether there were people in the church who were stealing, although the truth is not known, I think it is true that there was some kind of situation where he had to say, 'Do not steal any more'.

Well, normally you might think, "Of course they have to quit stealing now that they have become Christians", but maybe they only knew how to live and had lived such a hard and unfortunate life that they could not quit it immediately.

Or maybe they have simply fallen into the habit of stealing and have come to believe in Jesus out of guilt, but are unable to break the bad habit.

### Part One

We need to remember that when a person believes in Jesus Christ and becomes a Christian, he or she does not become a perfect person at the moment of becoming a Christian, but is born again, born anew.

To be born again means to be born as a baby who cannot do anything on his own.

Because you are born anew, you start as a child, immature, weak and unable to judge what you should do, what is good and what is bad.

When we speak of a Christian, we tend to judge and distinguish him according to the moral and ethical standards of the world, saying, "Of course he is a Christian, he should be able to do that much". We may then tend to think that if he has reached that required level, he is a Christian, if not, he is not a Christian, and further that if he has reached that level, salvation will endure, and if not, salvation will cease to exist.

However, in the Bible, e.g. in 1 Corinthians, the Corinthian church members who have made various mistakes are not told, "You are not Christians", but "You are like infants in Christ who cannot eat hard food, who can only drink milk, as if you were not of the Spirit. You are still of the flesh, as if you did not belong to the Spirit".

In other words, we must not forget that every person starts as a little baby when they believe in Jesus.

They still sin, they still make mistakes, they still struggle, they still fall down, and they still cause trouble for others. They do, and have a great potential to do, things that you might think, "Oh, you're going to do that? Nevertheless, while making mistakes, they all deepen their faith with countless repentances, and come to know forgiveness, grace and their own sinfulness.

The more we know about our own sinfulness and the forgiveness and grace of God that far outweighs it, the more we acknowledge them, the more we feel our neighbour's pain, weakness and sinfulness as if it were our own. We can then sympathise and pray together, sharing that we have received nothing but the very same grace from God, and that we are equally pitiful, but more blessed and loved than ever before.

Indeed, we grow and mature as we experience first-hand the theme verse, 'Love covers a multitude of sins', with one another. This means that everyone starts as an infant.

'Love covers a multitude of sins' is not a cover-up of sin.

It means being able to look at, explore and acknowledge the deepest and darkest parts of ourselves that we had been hesitant to see, explore or acknowledge, being able to be honest, because of our confidence that we are

saved because of the love and forgiveness of the Lord Jesus, or because of our faith that we will inherit the kingdom of God as children of God.

It means that we are changed from keeping something hidden because we wanted to be approved by someone, to being able to share everything with God (though maybe not everything with people), our dark and sinful side.

It is, and when we share, that we can remember, realise and rejoice that we are wearing a new person, that we are born anew.

And that is that we can pray together with our neighbours in peace of mind, sharing our weakness and immaturity, helping each other, waiting and hoping for each other.

That is what is meant by the words of 1 Peter 4:8: 'For love covers a multitude of sins'.

Let's go to James 5.

### **James 5:16 (PowerPoint).**

The 'righteous' here are Christians.

The word means everyone who has been born again in Christ.

A 'righteous person' is someone who, even though they struggle, fail, stumble and sin, never forgets that they and others are born again in Christ - someone who never gives up on themselves or on others.

It says that if such people pray for each other, expressing their sins to each other, there will be healing.

What could be a greater strength, encouragement, reassurance and enrichment of the soul in living in this sinful world as sinful people?

Rather than receiving or acquiring something, the mere fact of being known, seen and heard is enough for a person to gain security, strength and healing.

Rather, it is the lack of them that causes people to become attached to things.

In Exodus 3:7,

### **Exodus 3:7 (PowerPoint)**

God told the Israelites.

God clearly knew that what was necessary and important for people was to be seen, heard and known, and He knew that this would lead to strength, healing and a feeling of being saved.

I think that counselling, listening and other forms of encouragement and

recovery stem from this God's attitude towards people.

The root of our anxiety is that we know and feel our dark side, but we know that we cannot do anything about it, that we cannot easily reveal it to others or let them know about it, that we do not know if they would understand us if we did, and that even if they did, it would only be a licking of wounds and not a fundamental solution or healing.

I think that sad realisation is at the root of the anxiety we have.

But it says, that if we share with each other the realisation that we are infants in Christ and pray for each other together, then there is healing.

For me, before I was married, Christian friends were precious to me, praying for each other and experiencing healing as we expressed our sins to each other.

We were sharing and praying for ourselves after weekday Bible study gatherings, after eating spicy ramen noodles at a friend's house, after eating kimchi jjigae in the apartment where I lived.

Since my marriage, I am doing the same with my wife.

## Part Two

The author of the book of Ephesians, the Apostle Paul, is a devout believer and Christian whom we would like to emulate. But he is a man who confronts his own sinfulness on a daily basis and confesses it honestly: "I am truly a wretched man. Who will deliver me from this body of death" (Rom 7:24).

And so he went on to know every day how great, how thankful, wise, gracious, merciful and the love of the Lord Jesus, the Lord Jesus' redemption, forgiveness and salvation are.

I think that the more he learned, the more he realised how great it was that he had been born again in the Lord Jesus, to the extent that the things, events and achievements that he used to be proud of became nothing more than dust and filth.

So, even in today's verse Ephesians 4:28, not a single word of judgement is said to a person who would have stolen, a Christian who would have stolen, "You are not a Christian", "You have lost your salvation", "You are no longer God's people. You are going to hell, what a bad person you are".

Rather, he encourages.

He strengthens them with consolation and encouragement, saying that they can change their behaviour, that they can recover, that they can get back what

they have lost.

He begins with the negative: "Do not steal", but develops the exhortation into the positive: "Work hard and do the right work with your hands so that you can give to those in need".

He never forsake them.

He speaks to them with the following expectation. "Stop living as if you are taking away the results of someone else's daily bread through the noble process of honest responsibility, hard work and sweat, neglecting the importance of that noble process, without due diligence and neglecting the results of that noble process. Stop living as if you are robbing, and know that you live by faith, conscious of God's grace to share, and live like that.

He admonishes us that the act of stealing is not only an act, but also comes from a fundamental value system and attitude to life.

Everyone, even becoming a Christian, is a newborn infant, weak, immature and, of course, making repeated mistakes, not knowing right from left, but grows up and matures,

No one becomes a Christian as a perfect person.

Rather, those who know, believe and are saved by Jesus live with the daily build-up of the realisation that nothing is worth taking before Him. The love of a parent for his newborn baby to the extent that he thinks, "I would do anything for this child!" They know the love of God the Father, who sees them with a love so loving and even more loving than that, and they are embraced by the love of Jesus and kept alive with the security that comes from the love of the Triune God.

And as they share this security with one another, they become mature adults in Christ as one.

So there is no forsaking in the words of Dr Paul.

What there is is an expectation.

The Bible continues to tell us that there are no shortcuts for one person to go on being perfected in the love of God.

It takes a long time and many different processes to finally become a mature adult in Christ.

It was true for Abraham and David. And for Noah, God spent 100 years before he actually boarded the Ark of Salvation.

### Part Three

In Ephesians 4:28, Paul seems to be trying to teach not only about the actual act of stealing, but also about a more essential, spiritual attitude and way of life before God.

The verse seems to teach us that the attitude of faith that only seeks short-circuiting benefits, such as becoming a great Christian in an instant by listening to an inspiring sermon a few times and being moved, or only hoping that if you pray for something, you will get some good result that you want all at once is spiritual thievery and stealing. Or, instead of doing what you should be doing, you try to make others do it so that you can have an easy life of faith, or you put your immaturity on the shelf and easily think that you have done what you should have done by excluding someone else, or instead of facing your immaturity seriously with faith, you try to make up for it with things that can compensate for it. Or, instead of taking your immaturity seriously with faith, you only look for things or people who can compensate for it, or instead of taking up the yoke that you must bear in Christ, you only think about using Jesus' words "I will give you rest" under the guise of rest for our souls, or you only look for reasons why you cannot do what you need to do, and avoid doing what you need to do. Or you keep a fortune in our wallets and hope that one day it will come true. Such attitudes themselves are the problems.

Faith is, after all, 'me in the presence of God'.

We cannot make those around us an excuse for any reason.

For example, what does a good school look like?

Is it a school with good teachers?

Is it a school with a good library, good facilities and a good education programme?

Of course, you can't say that those factors are not important too.

But fundamentally, it is up to the students there to decide whether a school is a good school or not.

I am very aware that getting good test scores is not what determines how good or bad a school is, but to give you an example, the following are some of the things that can determine how good or bad a school is. If a student has a career path that he or she wants to pursue and has set a goal to achieve good test scores for that purpose, he or she thinks "studying is not something you do with

my head, but with my buttocks” with sitting long time in front of the desk, and sincerely facing the material in front of him or her and works through it, no matter how painful it is, and whether or not he or she is willing to work hard. How many students are hungry enough to seek reasons for not being able to do something within what is given to them, even if it is hard or painful, not from others or the environment, but from themselves?

I think the same aspect applies to churches.

What kind of church is a good church?

Is it a good church if it has a great pastor, a great chapel, great facilities, great land or a great crowd of people?

If we look for a joyful life of faith in the conditions of the pastor, the facilities and the environment in which we are placed, i.e. without facing the Word of the Bible as I should, without living the Word of the Bible as I should, without praying the prayers as I should, without doing the work as I should, if we put them on the shelf and seek the conditions for a good church outside ourselves, that too will be stealing.

If we seek only results and harvest without spiritual study and serving the Lord as a Christian standing before God, that too will be stealing.

They are acts of spiritual thievery that we are surprisingly prone to.

If we are only chanting 'I am loved, I am loved', 'healing, healing', 'joy, joy', as otherworldly things, 'that too will be stealing', says the Apostle Paul.

Putting off the old man and putting on the new man while continuing to be renewed in spirit and mind means being aware of unacknowledged spiritual thievery, and if you are aware of it, making the decision to quit, and trying to break free from the theft of trying to gain only pleasure and enjoyment without sweat on our forehead.

Rather, I think that the goodness or badness of the church is shown by whether or not there are people who remember that God gives them grace every day, who are aware that "I am one who can share with others", and who are able to put this awareness into action.

I believe that the early church, including the Ephesian church, was given only bad conditions, not good ones, but they did not give up on fulfilling their portion as a Christian standing before God.

There was a film called 'Warrior's Honor', and even a samurai would keep his honor, and even more so for a Christian.

## Part Four

There are no shortcuts in faith in God.

We have to taste both the bitter and the sweet, and the Bible is unsparing about the fact that we have to go through the valley of the shadow of death to get to the place God wants us to be.

Yet, I have been wondering every day recently whether it is because of my prideful attitude that I seem to be bombarded with messages that try to hide this fact and only talk about the good things that are easy to hear.

We miss out on what is important until we are in crisis.

The Bible never talks about easy comfort, healing and consolation, does it?

Of course, when we are down and out, we can be encouraged by the words of the Bible more than once, but the Bible never once speaks of superficial pleasures and joys.

We may not be able to read the Word of the Bible because our naive, fleshly thoughts of spiritual theft, as if we belong to the flesh and not to the Spirit, have twisted the words the Bible is trying to speak.

I wonder if it is because God is well aware of our spiritual proclivities that He included the straightforward and meaningful words "Thou shalt not steal" in the Ten Commandments of Moses, a thick extract from the 66 books of the Bible.

### Exodus 20:15 (PowerPoint)

The eighth of God's Ten Commandments is "Thou shalt not steal", and the first to fourth commandments of Moses' Ten Commandments are about the "one and only absolute God", which, in terms of the order of heaven, earth and all things, is a perfectly natural thing to say.

However, this world has lost the ability to do what is natural, which is to "take the one and only absolute God as God".

The Ten Commandments of Moses tell us that what has arisen in such a world is 'stealing'.

In other words, "stealing" itself is a sinful act that is committed by human beings who have fallen away from God.

Both against God and against man.

In Leviticus 25, God says, "The land is mine", but if you look at a world map,



you will see borderlines all over the place, and flags of countries proudly claiming the territory of each country along those borderlines as their own.

In fact, if you go to the borders between countries, the land borders, there are huge man-made barricades, but there are no lines drawn on the mountains, rivers, oceans or land, as if they were on a world map.

They are all just man-made lines that seem to justify man's creation and stealing from God.

Not only fighting among nations, peoples and regions for territory, but also overhunting, logging, polluting and destroying the land as if they had no knowledge of God's ownership, until the land is destroyed under the guise of economic activity - without knowing that this is stealing from God.

In recent years, the people who once were considered as poor and used and exploited to support the major economic powers have somehow become economically richer, and the prices have risen, and the gap between rich and poor and the gap of money value between nations is narrowing. Then, as if to say, "Not so fast", the so-called economic powers continue to raise their prices, increase the value of their money and do other tricks that do not allow them to change the international master-servant relationship between the users and the exploited. They say that they still shares with those who are somewhat in need for their hypocrisy, but that they cannot live in such a way that they can share with those who are truly in need and become equal.

Of course, as the Bible says, the world will be destroyed.

We must also look honestly at the sadness of the fact that we are part of that cycle, and that we cannot live without being part of that system.

Nevertheless, Apostle Paul tells us that the Lord God tells us, "Do not steal".

He said "Do righteous work with your own hands, toiling and laboring, so that you may share with those in need," and encourages us, with great generosity, to live spiritually and physically until the time at the end when the Lord Jesus will come again as if we were unjust caretakers used their master's property in a mocking way to share with others.

### **Luke 16:1-13 (PowerPoint)**

To this world and to us who cannot help but steal from God, Jesus, with the generosity of 'the master praised the unjust caretaker for acting wisely', encourages us to 'work righteously and laboriously with your own hands, that

you may give to those in need, even though you may be unjust in that you are still stealing from me'. He even promises to praise us when we do so.

He even tells us to "make friends for yourselves with the wealth of injustice, which is selfishly consuming the things of God."

He goes on to say, 'Therefore, if you are not faithful with the riches of iniquity, who will entrust you with the true riches?' He also says, 'Your religious attitude and attitude towards the decaying riches of this world is the inheritance of the kingdom of heaven, which God has promised to pass on to you, the kingdom of God. God has promised to pass it on to us.

For us Christians, the teaching "do not steal" is not such a simple superficial thing as "just do not steal things", but there is a tremendous vision of God, and it is to stand on God's view of things, to see this world, me and other people with a true spiritual worldview.

The Bible tells us that the root of the cycle of 'stealing' lies in the spiritual immaturity, childhood and ignorance of us human beings before God.

And once we have been taught, admonished and realised about the nature of that 'stealing', then we are required to determine to practice the Words "Do not steal. Rather, do the righteous work with your hands and toil hard, so that you may share with those who are in need" from spiritual to carnal matters.

#### Conclusion.

None of the Christians and churches since the coming of the Lord Jesus 2000 years ago can keep saying, "Let me sleep because it is winter, not spring".

Because all through the last 2000 years, the word, "Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is near. The harvest is many, but the labourers are few" has been ringing through the world.

It must happen that the tree will sprout, blossom, bear fruit, and grow even more, and under that one tree, people will rest, birds will sing, people will eat the fruit and come back to life.

Of course, all of this is due to the grace of God, like the master who praised the deeds of the unjust caretaker with a great bosom, but we must make it a habit to count and remember that grace and become a tree like the one in Jesus' mustard seed analogy.

Each one of us.

You may think, "No, no, I can't be such a tree," but even the fallen leaves that naturally fall without effort can fertilise the land beneath them, and without fallen leaves, no new shoots can sprout.

Without fallen leaves, new shoots will not sprout.

The church has been built up by such trees, and Jesus designed it to be so. And that design is a model for the world.

The church is where we come to learn, to be taught, to be comforted and to receive strength, that we cannot do anything alone, and for that, each one of us is called by God to embody that.

We are now called to such a place of blessing.

If we only receive grace and run away, it is stealing.

If we receive grace, we wish to show it by our actions.

Finally, I would like to finish by reading the words of 1 John 3.

### **1 John 3:17-18 (PowerPoint)**

Let's pray.

Benediction: Ephesians 4: 28.